

STEWING

BEEF STEW

The basic British beef stew simmers in water or in stock and is always thickened to a greater or lesser degree. Some include carrots and other root vegetables but I think this encourages cooks not to pay attention – there is little worthwhile left to taste in vegetables which have stewed for several hours, as their flavour has all been gifted to the liquor in the pot. If you like stews with vegetables in them, put them for the last 25 minutes or so (remembering the liquid in which they will cook is barely simmering) and cut them in big pieces, so they really can both give flavour and still retain plenty of their own. If you are wanting something more sophisticated, cut the vegetables into neat matchsticks and rounds and barrels and add them for only 15 minutes or so.

How to do it:

For four to six servings

1.5 kg/3lb stewing beef, preferably a mix of cuts, cut into 5cm/2” pieces

Few tablespoons flour, salt and pepper

2 tablespoons oil or beef dripping

125g/4oz smoked bacon in rough pieces

250g/8oz onion, chopped

1 tablespoon flour

1 beef stock cube dissolved in 750ml/ 1 ½ pints water

Or

750mls/ 1 ½ pints beef, vegetable or brown chicken stock

Bouquet garni of fresh herbs

1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

Heat the oil or dripping in a large frying pan and cook the bacon until it is well browned but not crisped and then put this into the bottom of a large flame proof or oven proof casserole, keeping as much of the oil or fat in the frying pan. Meanwhile season the flour with the salt and pepper and quickly toss the meat in this; you want only the thinnest coating. Fry the beef in batches until nicely browned and add it to the bacon in the casserole, Turn the heat down under the frying pan and then fry the onion until really soft and sweet tasting, which might take 20 or more minutes. Turn up the heat to give it some colour and then stir in the flour and cook for two minutes. Pour in the stock stirring continuously until evenly thickened; it won't be very thick. Pour this on to the meat and bacon, and add then add what herbs you have – a bay leaf or two, some thyme and parsley tied with cotton long enough to tie one end to the saucepan handle. If you are feeling a bit Continental, add some garlic cloves,

too. Bring the mixture slowly to the boil and the moment it bubbles cover and cook over a very low heat for at least two hours or in a 140C/300F oven. Best made the day before and reheated gently.

Increasing your repertoire

- **Beef with Wine:** Make as above but use the equivalent of a bottle of wine or a mixture of wine and water. The wine should be a fresh, young and vibrant red rather than aged and mellow, because the expensive nuances will be lost. If you use a young Burgundy you will have made *boeuf Bourguinnone*, traditionally finished with button mushrooms and small onions – but you don't have to do so.
- **Beef with Beer:** For this you need more onions: so, very slowly cook (up to an hour) and then brown 750g/ 1 1/2lb onions in 50g/2oz butter stir in two tablespoons flour, cook a few minutes and then pour in 500ml/18 fl oz beer or stout but not lager while you whisk furiously. The meat is floured and browned the same way as above in butter or oil, and then added to the sauce with whatever herbs you have plus two tablespoons red wine or sherry vinegar. At the end of cooking you might like to add up to two tablespoons of brown sugar – but if you have properly sweetened your onion you will need none or very little.

Tempering this with black pepper shortly before serving gives excellent extra savouriness.